

Sustaining momentum - tale of a tourist.

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"Looking up at you, eyes brimming with intelligence and potential, Cuba is the beautiful and vulnerable street child of the Caribbean. Behind you walk the economic pimps, intent on exploiting Cuba's potential for their own (offshore) gains."
An economist's observation of Cuba 40 years after the Revolution...

On January 11th, 20 of BC's top farmers and one economist boarded on a plane and headed off to Cuba for a 10 day, five province tour of Cuba's farming regions. Arranged for them by the Cuban government. Next July, 20 Cuban farmers and their interpreters will board a plane to spend two weeks visiting British Columbia farms.

The link? Sustainable agriculture. And depending on who you talked to, you'd likely get two entirely different stories on how this whole thing got started.

Many would suggest that it was that first meeting between the tourist (me) and two Senior Officials from Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture over tiny cups of espresso one hot day last June that sparked it all. And they'd be right. As I sat in a tiny corner office overlooking Havana's Vedado district listening to Juan Leon Vega and Juan Carlos Loyola speak passionately of the events of the past decade that took Cuba's farmers from large scale, chemically-dependent monoculture to leaders in sustainable farming practices, I was struck by the enormous potential and equally enormous needs of Cuba's farming community.

Banished from the economic table by successive American governments intent on linking politics and trade when it suits their purposes (while the original US trade embargo against Cuba was the product of Cold War politics of the 50's, it's hard to believe today's Helms-Burton Act is not related to the politics of market protection for America's powerful sugar lobby), Cuba's survival is all the more amazing.

Despite crippling economic sanctions and massive poverty, Cuba's literacy rate is considerably higher than that of Canada or British Columbia. Cuba's health care system - although critically starved for supplies - boasts a higher doctor/patient ratio than either B.C. or Canada. And despite the obvious differences in our economic conditions, farmers from BC and Cuba now stand together on the frontier of commercial organic production and sustainable agricultural systems.

With the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Cuba's pipeline for fertilizers (one million tonnes), pesticides (40,000 tonnes) and animal feed grains (two million tonnes) — supplied her in exchange for Cuban sugar to feed the sweet tooth of the great Russian Bear — dried up overnight, bringing Cuba's farm sector to it's knees.

Today, although increasing food production capacity remains an overwhelmingly urgent national priority, Cuba's highly advanced bio-technology sector supports a farm sector which is 30 percent organic. (Cuba is selling "organic" citrus fruits into the Pacific Rim; Cuban farmers rarely capture their value because they don't yet have an organic certification infrastructure.)

Driven by a national priority of self-sufficiency in food production, Cuba has also emerged as a leader in urban agriculture: Havana alone produces 45 tons of food a year from balcony and rooftop gardens. Greenhouses - initially imported from Israel to produce the food (tomatoes, etc.) needed by Cuba's tourist trade - are now being manufactured on a limited basis locally. Seventy-five percent of Cuban farmland is now in the hands of small farmers, twenty-five percent remains in state-run

cooperatives. Cuba supplies onion seed to the rest of the Caribbean. Cuban farmers are involved in a joint venture to produce pumpkins for a Nova Scotia farmer cooperative.

Yet her people are beyond poor. Food is beyond scarce. And her needs — capital, technology, infrastructure, equipment (and in particular remotorization: the replacement of aged combustion engines which - despite the fine-honed repair skills of Cuban mechanics - can no longer keep ancient machinery going) are almost overwhelming. Cuba. A land of great contrasts. A land of great potential. And a land of potentially strategic importance for B.C. farmers.

As a Canadian, I knew my country was committed to offering Cuba meaningful assistance in its pursuit of solutions to the problems facing her people. I also knew, as an Agrologist, that sharing with Cuban farmers the expertise held by BC farmers could be of considerable strategic importance to both countries.

As so as I sat sipping espresso that hot day in June in a small corner office overlooking Havana's Vedado district, I began telling the two Senior Officials from Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture of British Columbia's farmers (their expertise, their challenges, and in particular their knowledge and leadership in the area of sustainable farm management systems), we three shared a vision that proved compelling. We left the meeting committed to making that vision a reality.

For my part, I came back to Canada and raised the potential of a farmer-to-farmer exchange with Cuba in my August column. It struck a chord with farmers. Air Transat agreed to block book airline seats without a deposit. Forty-two percent of the entire Exchange budget was raised through farmer and consultant contributions. For their part, the Cuban government followed through on their commitment to organize a comprehensive, ten day, five province (Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Santi Spiritus, Ciego de Avila and Havana) tour of Cuba's farming regions and contributed \$5,500 in hard cash for tour transportation and administration. In return, and with the strong endorsement of the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy and Senators Perrault and Whelan, I committed to raising the funds needed to cover Exchange overheads and bring 20 Cuban farmers and interpreters for a two week tour of BC agriculture in July.

At this year's Agricultural Institute of Canada meetings in Vancouver, Dr. John Graham (International Development Research Corporation, Singapore) noted that farmer-to-farmer exchanges have traditionally proven the single most productive investment Canada can make to assist both developing and local farm economies. A successful people-to-people project at the agricultural level may also provide a very useful, non-ideologically-oriented model for other sectors, facilitating Canada's foreign policy priorities for meaningful "engagement" with the Castro government.

What's in it for BC farmers? As Cuba's farm sector evolves, there will be significant opportunities for the supply of sustainable farming technology and farm management systems. Joint venture opportunities. Partnerships in the development of organic markets and infrastructure. Assistance in meeting the challenges ahead. Americans, for now, are shut out of this market, but that won't last forever — some estimate that within 5-10 years, Cuban trade sanctions will be dropped. The 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange is the first step towards ensuring that BC farmers and agri-business concerns are first in line to develop sustainable partnerships which will enhance the priorities of both regions.

And so yes, it is quite true that it was the meeting between the tourist and the two Senior Officials from Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture that hot day in June in a small corner office overlooking Havana's Vedado district that sparked the vision for the 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Exchange.

But it was the haunting vulnerability of the young Havana teen's eloquent question, eyes searching mine as he and his friend squeegee'd the windshield of our Jeep stopped at an intersection later that day on our way to the airport: "So what is your impression of our country?" — this, after quickly ascertaining that my 18 year old daughter was unlikely to accept his friend's fervent proposal of marriage — that made the Exchange inevitable.

NEXT MONTH: CUBA! WHAT THE FARMERS SAW...